

Testimony of
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Senior Master Sergeant
United States Air Force (Retired)

Before the
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Benefits

Committee on Education and the Workforce
Subcommittee on 21st Century Competitiveness

April 9, 2003

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, my name is Sandra Sessoms-Penny. I am a retired Senior Master Sergeant of the United States Air Force, having served nearly 22 years of active duty. I am also an Assistant Principal at Smithfield Middle School in the Isle of Wight County School Division, located in Smithfield, Virginia. I am known as Ms. "S-P" to the students, staff, and community of Smithfield Middle School, which serves nearly 900 sixth, seventh and eighth grade students. I am also a former Troops-to-Teachers participant and currently a Troops-to-Teachers mentor. I am honored to be invited here today to share my personal experiences as a graduate of the Troops-to-Teachers program.

Florida is my home state, but after having traveled throughout the United States and overseas for most of my adult life, my family and I decided to settle in the Commonwealth of Virginia in 1995. I entered the Air Force at 18 years of age with a high school diploma and lots of prayers and encouragement to do well from my family and friends. I retired from Langley Air Force Base as the Senior Paralegal and Law Office Manager having worked in the Office of the Staff Judge Advocate.

I entered the Air Force determined to pursue my education. At nearly every permanent duty location where I was stationed, I earned a few college credits. I was never in one place long enough to finish a college program due to military commitments, family needs, or fulfilling each college's requirements. After ten years and four colleges, I earned my first degree, an Associate Degree in Administrative Management from the Community College of the Air Force. While at Langley Air Force Base, I applied for and was granted leave under the "Operation Bootstrap Program" to finish my Bachelors Degree in Human Resources Management from St. Leo College in 1986, just before receiving orders to transfer to a new duty assignment. Being an individual who believes in seizing opportunities, I earned an additional degree while serving on active duty -- a masters degree in Human Resources Management from Troy State University, Montgomery and began a second master's degree in Education from Old Dominion University prior to retiring from active duty. I am currently working on my doctorate in education from The George Washington University.

I was very fortunate that most of my education was funded through the old “GI” Bill and tuition assistance. My original intention was to attend law school and become an attorney after leaving the military in 1995. However, shortly before I retired, I began to notice information about the Troops-to-Teachers program. I was intrigued by this program because it offered the opportunity to convey to kids and other adults the importance of education, by leading by example. One day I found myself in the Base Education Office at Langley and on the same day I visited educational advisors who shared information with me about the Military Career Transition Program being offered by Old Dominion University, located in Norfolk, Virginia. The advisors from Old Dominion University completed an informal review of my college transcripts and started me on a journey that has opened more doors for me than I could have ever imagined. In order to help defray the cost of completing the program, I also completed an application for the Troops-to-Teachers Program. It took an additional 18 months to earn a Masters of Science degree in Education. In order to obtain this Master’s Degree, I traveled to three universities on six different campuses.

During the 18 months it took to finish the program, I took classes related to special education, classroom management, instructional delivery, subject matter content, educational principals and foundation, and other education based courses. I also completed a classroom observation and did student teaching. Because of my participation in the Troops-to-Teachers program and the Military Career Transition Program, I was able to student teach for six weeks rather than the three months required of other education majors. I student taught a sixth grade class in a public school setting. I learned from the observation and student teaching experience, that a career in education was my true calling. I also held a full time job while completing the program and took a leave of absence to complete the student teaching requirement. I successfully completed the PRAXIS examination for new teachers on my first attempt.

The Troops-to-Teachers program offered monetary incentives to school divisions that hired its participants when I was in the program. I made a decision that I did not want to be a substitute teacher. I had heard many horror stories about the treatment that substitute teachers received, so I decide to commit all or nothing. I applied for a job that I saw advertised in the local newspaper. I was interviewed, and hired in the middle of the school year, directly after graduating from the Troops-to-Teachers program. I know of individuals who were hired even before completing the program because the need for teachers was so great. Transitioning from the military into the classroom was an adjustment, but I learned quickly and established a rapport with my administrators, peers, students, and their parents. I enjoyed the interactions in the school setting. It has proven to be the most challenging experience I have ever encountered. Some interactions were a little more than challenging, but fortunately my administrator, lead teacher, and team teachers were supportive and helped to train me on the nuisances of the teaching profession.

I began my teaching career teaching language arts and civics to eighth grade students at Smithfield Middle School in February 1997 and continued in the position until December 2000. In January of 2000, I pursued the Education Specialist Degree offered

by The George Washington University and completed the program in the spring of 2001. In January of 2001, I accepted a position as Assistant Principal of Smithfield Middle School. Before the end of the school year, a new assistant principal (who was also a Troops-to-Teachers participant) and I were managing Smithfield Middle School. We both applied for the vacant principal's position and my Troops-to-Teachers colleague, Mr. Barry Davis, was awarded the position.

In the summer of 2001, I began the doctoral program for Educational Leadership and Administration through The George Washington University with an anticipated graduation date in 2004. I funded my matriculation for the Education Specialist degree with the last of my GI Bill benefits. I am proud to say that I took full advantage of those benefits and used every penny of them, along with personal funds and small amounts of tuition reimbursement from my school district and the university. Currently, I am funding my doctorate degree from student loans and my own personal funds.

Because of my positive and enriching experiences with the Troops-to-Teachers Program as a participant and as a mentor, I am writing my dissertation on *Perceptions of Troops-to-Teachers Participants Filling Teacher and School Administrator Shortages in the Commonwealth of Virginia*. Also during this degree program, I wrote a policy analysis paper, *Using Former Military Personnel to Resolve the Teacher Shortage* on the Troops-to-Teachers program. This paper was selected for publication by George Washington University.

I eagerly accepted the role of a Troops-to-Teachers mentor when asked and have been speaking to and communicating with service members from all branches of the military interested in the program since 1997. Individuals call or e-mail me with questions about the program and opportunities provided by the program. I have spoken with over 150 people over the last six years who were looking for new careers and wanted to know if teaching would be a viable option for them. Additionally, I aid my school district in helping to recruit teachers at job fairs at least twice a year.

Of those I have spoken with or e-mailed, all ask if the program provides financial assistance. And if not, what are the benefits of the program. Prior to the program being refunded, my general response was that the program was being reviewed and that prospective participants should wait for new information. In all honesty, I am sure that having funding to support my course work in obtaining my education degree affected my decision to enter the teaching profession. The added blessing for me was that I really enjoy the field of education. If the Troops-to-Teachers Program, had not provided financial assistance, I probably would have chosen a different career path in either human resources management or law.

Some additional advantages I share with mentees about the Troops-to-Teachers Program have been networking with other professional educators and being able to use many of the skills developed in the military in the classroom such as leadership, management, communications, counseling, planning, technological, and instructional skills. I emphasize the overwhelming need for adult role models and mentors in the

public schools. We as former military members have high expectations for our students and our staff. Yet we are willing to work with the students and staff to achieve those expectations.

I would like to offer several suggestions to improve the Troops-to-Teachers Program. First, I would suggest additional funding to develop intensive teacher preparation programs. These programs would help to ensure that teacher candidates in the program are well prepared for the classroom. This would help support the “No Child Left Behind” initiative in providing the nation’s schools with “highly qualified” teachers.

Second, the agency should resume providing grants or direct funding to school districts that hire Troops-to-Teachers candidates. This provides an incentive for these school districts to take a chance on former military personnel, who may not have had as much formal training as education majors.

Finally, I would advocate providing funds to support participants pursuing advanced degrees. Graduate school is a very competitive process, so I would not anticipate that large number of individuals would pursue this path. For those who do however, the support would allow them to take the lessons learned in the military into the classroom and then into the policy and program development arena. Moreover, participants with advanced degrees could assist in filling the shortage in administrator level positions in school districts.

In light of the current war, many service people (active, reserve, and guard) will be displaced when they return home. This committee should adopt measures now, to help recruit those individuals who may want to change or have to change careers when they return. Since many reports have stated that there are current and growing teacher and administrator shortages nationwide, it would be prudent to attempt to provide some of those service members an opportunity to not only fill the shortages but to also provide our troops with other jobs that will help to support the nation.

In conclusion, my personal experience as a Troops-to-Teachers participant and mentor has been very positive and inspiring. In fact, that experience was transformational. My participation has also raised important questions for this committee to consider: How do we find the best teacher candidates? How do we ensure that those teachers set the high standards needed to prepare our students for the future and global competitiveness? How do we capitalize on the strength of a nation from our military service and restore patriotism in our schools? How can we better serve military members who choose a career in education? And finally, why is it important to move forward now to help those who serve the nation during our time of conflict to also help serve our nation through a time of peace? I am sure that your answers to these questions will lead you to providing enhanced support for the Troops-to-Teachers program.

Thank you for this opportunity to share my views with you today.

BIOGRAPHICAL DATA

SANDRA G. SESSOMS-PENNY

EDUCATION:

- ❖ Doctoral Candidate, The George Washington University
- ❖ EdS, The George Washington University, 2001
- ❖ M.S., Education, Old Dominion University, 1996
- ❖ M.S., Human Resources Management, Troy State University, Montgomery, 1991
- ❖ B.S., Human Resources Management, Saint Leo College, 1986
- ❖ A.A., Administrative Management, Community College of the Air Force, 1986

CERTIFICATIONS:

- ❖ Education Specialist Degree, Educational Administration Endorsement (2001)
- ❖ Virginia Postgraduate Professional License, Middle Education Grades 4-8 (1996)
- ❖ Paralegal Certification, Judge Advocate General's Department, United States Air Force (year)

EDUCATION WORK EXPERIENCE:

- ❖ Assistant Principal, Smithfield Middle School, Smithfield, Virginia
January 2001-present
- ❖ Lead Teacher and Teacher, Smithfield Middle School, Smithfield, Virginia
February 1997 – December 2000
- ❖ Student Teacher, Yorktown Middle School, Yorktown, Virginia
September – November 1996

MILITARY CAREER WORK EXPERIENCE:

- ❖ Troops-to-Teachers Participant and Mentor (1995 - present)
- ❖ Family Advocacy Program Assistance, Langley Air Force Base, Virginia
June 1995-February 1997
- ❖ Law Office Manager and Paralegal Superintendent (1973 - 1995 active duty)
Administrative Assistant
Aircraft Electrician, C-130 aircraft

AWARDS AND DECORATIONS:

- ❖ Teacher of the Year – Isle of Wight County and Smithfield Middle 1999/2000
- ❖ DOD – Meritorious Service Awards; USAF Commendation Medals; Good Conduct Awards, and National Defense Service Medal
- ❖ Policy Analysis – selected for publication by The George Washington University

FAMILY AND RESIDENCE:

- ❖ Husband - Alonzo Penny (USAF Retired); Son – Andre' J. Sessoms (1st Lt, USA)
- ❖ Reside in Yorktown, Virginia

PERSONAL ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

- ❖ Associate Minister, Langley Air Force Base Chapel, Gospel Services